



File Code: 1950; 2400
Date: May 5, 2020

Dear Interested Party:

This project announcement letter serves to initiate scoping, "an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed" (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping is required for all Forest Service proposed actions, including those that would appear to be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS (§220.6) (36 CFR 220.4(e)(1)). I request your input on the following proposed actions regarding the Tiak Project.

The Tiak Project is located on the Ouachita National Forest (ONF) Oklahoma Ranger Districts. It is within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service Region 8 (Southern Region).

The Ouachita National Forest, Oklahoma Ranger Districts, proposes to implement the following management activities in the Tiak Project Area.

All quantities are approximate: treatment areas are subject to reduction due to slope avoidance and/or streamside management areas.

- 2,483 acres of commercial thinning in pine and mixed hardwood stands (average 70 ft² BA) to reduce the threat to southern pine beetle and increase residual tree health and vigor
- 1,444 acres of modified seedtree regeneration harvest in pine and pine-hardwood stands to establish a new age class and provide early seral habitat for wildlife
- 1,202 acres of mechanical and chemical site preparation of modified seedtree areas for natural regeneration
- 243 acres of mechanical site preparation of modified seedtree areas for natural regeneration
- 1,444 acres of timber stand improvements (croptree release and pre-commercial thinning)
- 10 miles of temporary roads for timber harvest activities
- 7,242 acres of midstory reduction using chemical or mechanical treatments
- 176 acres of road daylighting by removing all trees and vegetation 30' from each side of the existing edge of FS system roads
- 12,000 acres treated with prescribed fire at 3-5 year intervals
- 65 miles of mechanical fireline maintenance
- 14 miles of new fireline construction
- 4 wildlife ponds constructed
- 20 fish structures placed in Hunters Pool and Kulli pond
- 12 acres of annual pond fertilization (Hunters Pool and Kulli pond)
- 12 acres of lime applied every 5-10 years (Hunters Pool and Kulli pond)
- 4 fish spawning beds refurbished with the addition of gravel in Hunters Pool



- 3,850 acres designated as the Caney Creek Walk-in Turkey Area
- 4 parking lots built to support walk-in access for hunting
- 9 miles of FS system roads seasonally closed to motorized vehicles within the proposed Caney Creek Walk-in Turkey Area from March 1 through August 31 to reduce disturbance and enhance nesting and recruitment of ground nesting birds
- 10 gates installed to support seasonal road closure in walk-in turkey area
- 9 gates installed for resource protection throughout the Tiak project area
- FS Road T20E closed (0.25 mile) for walk-in fishing
- 1 parking lot built to support walk-in fishing
- Jetties and dam repaired at Hunters Pool
- Rock added to Hunters Pool boat launch
- 1.88 miles (combined total) of system road change from maintenance level 2 to maintenance level 1
- 2.08 miles (combined total) of system road change from maintenance level 1 to maintenance level 2
- FS Road T16A (0.38 mile) decommissioned

The intent of these activities is to move the project area toward the desired conditions described in and adopted by the 2005 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Ouachita National Forest (Revised Forest Plan) and to partially meet the objectives established by it. Maps are enclosed showing the project area and approximate locations of the proposed activities.

The analysis area for the Tiak Project is composed of Compartments 1801-1805 and 1807-1817. Geographically, the project area is located east and southeast of Idabel, Oklahoma, south of Little River National Wildlife Refuge, north of the Red River, and west of the Arkansas State boundary. The project area is comprised of many scattered blocks of National Forest System (NFS) lands lying within Township 7 South, Range 25 East; and, Township 7 South, Range 26 East; and, Township 7 South, Range 27 East; and, Township 8 South, Range 25 East; and, Township 8 South, Range 26 East; and, Township 8 South, Range 27 East; and, Township 9 South, Range 25 East; and, Township 9 South, Range 26 East; and, Township 9 South, Range 27 East; and, Township 10 South, Range 26 East, McCurtain County, Oklahoma. The 155,015-acre project area contains approximately 14,923 acres of National Forest System lands. Proposed actions would occur on NFS lands in Management Areas (MAs) 9 (Water and Riparian) and 15 (West Gulf Coastal Plain).

Purpose of the Action

Overall guidance for this action is found in the Revised Forest Plan. The primary goal of the Revised Forest Plan is to promote diverse, healthy, productive, and sustainable ecosystems. The purpose of this action is to restore the health and vigor of the project area by providing for the diversity of plant and animal communities, creating early seral habitat, reducing fuel accumulation, and producing a sustainable yield of wood products.

Need for the Action

The Revised Forest Plan provides primary direction for all management activities and contains the *Vision, Strategy, and Standards* for guiding all natural resource management activities for the Ouachita National Forest.



- Current conditions in the project area do not meet the desired conditions of the Ouachita National Forest's management areas and the ecological systems that occur within.
- Past fire suppression activities have removed the natural role of fire from the landscape, resulting in excessive fuel accumulations. This may increase the risk of damage to resources in the event of wildfire.
- The absence of fire has resulted in reduced open understories necessary for the growth of many native plant communities, wildlife foods, and the natural regeneration of pine and oak.
- The role of recurring fire, mechanical and/or chemical treatments are needed to reduce midstories and understories to promote the growth of native grasses and forbs utilized by wildlife, to promote the natural regeneration of pine and oak, and to provide habitat conditions for plants adapted to fire.
- There is a lack of high quality forage and a lack of nesting habitat for species requiring early successional habitat.
- There is a need for standing water to be available throughout the project area year-round for consumption by wildlife and as reproductive sites for native amphibian species.
- Pine and hardwood stands contain damaged, poorly formed and diseased trees. Trees are overcrowded or densely stocked, reducing growth and crown development. These conditions result in stress and reduced vigor and health, increasing susceptibility to insects and disease.
- The FS road system needs management activities in order to protect soil, water, and wildlife resources; reduce road-related barriers to aquatic organism passage; and to provide access to stands within the project area using temporary road construction. Some existing system roads are not useable and create the need for road rehabilitation. Other system roads may need seasonal closure; gates or other barriers.
- The Ouachita National Forest has been asked to provide a place to hunt on National Forest System lands free of disturbance from motor vehicles. The public would like the opportunity to hunt wild turkey in the spring in an undisturbed setting and to minimize human disturbance during the nesting and brood rearing seasons. All wildlife, including other ground nesting birds, would benefit from minimizing human disturbance during the breeding season.

Invitation to Participate in Project Planning

Scoping is not limited to a single point in time; we will continue to accept and consider comments until an implementation decision is made. With that said, your comments will be most helpful if they are received early in the process. They will help us identify environmental issues associated with implementation, and alternative ways to meet Forest plan objectives and desired conditions. Your involvement will enable us to better assess concerns of the public.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will become a part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Objection Process

This project is subject to subparts A and B of *36 CFR Part 218 Project-Level Predecisional Administrative Review Process* (objection process); it is not authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA).



Scoping is open and continuous, but your comments would be most helpful if received by **June 6, 2020**. Providing specific written comments during this time will afford you standing to later file an objection to the project, should you desire (see Upcoming Project Planning Steps).

Pursuant to §218.2, specific written comments should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider.

How to Comment

Specific written comments must be submitted to: District Ranger, 111 S. State Highway 259-A, Broken Bow, OK 74728 or fax to 580-494-6406. Oral or hand-delivered comments may be made at 111 S. State Highway 259-A, Hochatown, Oklahoma during normal weekday business hours from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Send electronic comments, in a common digital format, to SM.FS.r8ouoklahcom@usda.gov. Please state "Tiak Project" in the email subject line when providing electronic comments or on the envelope when replying by mail.

Upcoming Planning Steps

As stated above, your comments will help us identify issues and they will be used to formulate alternatives to this proposal. An environmental analysis will be conducted and the results will be documented in an environmental assessment (EA).

Upon completion, the EA will be released for public review and comment. A 30-day notice and comment period pursuant to 36 CFR 218 will be initiated. This comment period will afford you another opportunity to obtain standing to later file an objection to the project, should you desire.

An objection period, if required, will follow the regulation found in §218.7. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the project and attributed to the objector, unless the issue is based on new information that arose after a designated opportunity to comment (§218.8(c)).

If you have questions about this project or would like more information, please contact Jona Tucker at 580-494-6402 ext.120 or jona.tucker@usda.gov.

Sincerely,



SCOTT OSBORNE
Acting District Ranger

Enclosures: 6 maps

